

**The Japanese of Latin America and the United States Government During World
War II**

Testimony By:

**Professor Daniel M. Masterson
Department of History
U.S. Naval Academy**

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It is well known that the great trauma of World War II caused untold suffering for tens of millions of people throughout the world. Nearly forgotten in the context of this enormous tragedy is the fate of more than two thousand Japanese Latin Americans. Their war time experience in many ways mirrors that of the 120,000 people of Japanese heritage in the United States who were interned for most of the duration of the War in camps throughout the Western United States. But in important ways these Japanese Latin Americas were even more vulnerable and their circumstances even more devastating than their U.S. counterparts. These Japanese residents of eight different Latin American nations, were arrested often without charges, briefly detained and then deported to the United States for internment in camps in the Southwest. Most significantly, before entering the United States these deportees were compelled to turn over their passports to U.S. officials. They thus entered the United States as “illegal aliens” making them subject to deportation once their internment in the U.S came to an end. When the vast majority of their former Latin American nations refused to allow them to return after the War, these detainees became “stateless” and unwilling refugees who were powerless to prevent their deportation to devastated post war Japan. Over the past two decades a handful of historians, journalists and activists have attempted to shed light on the story of these individuals whom one historian called “Pawns in a Triangle of Hate.” This committee hearing represents a very important effort to further U.S. government awareness of misguided U.S. policy during the World War II years.

Japanese Latin Americans

Who were these Japanese Latin Americans, why did they emigrate, and what prompted some Latin American governments to willingly cooperate in their deportation to the U.S. and not others? The first Japanese emigrants arrived in Mexico and Peru in the late 1890's. Within a decade thousands more would settle in Brazil, which would become home to nearly 200,000 Japanese-Brazilians by the beginning of World War II. These emigrants came mainly from the poorest southern prefectures of Japan and the Ryukyu islands, mainly Okinawa. Seeking relief from increasing agrarian and working class unrest, the Japanese government saw emigration as a "safety valve" that might relieve some of the suffering caused by the nation's rapid modernization during the Meiji era.¹

In Mexico these Japanese emigrants settled in Baja California and successfully raised cotton. They also worked in the mines and on the railroads of the Northern states of Coahuila, Sonora, and Durango. In Peru, mostly male Japanese emigrants were enlisted as contract laborers to work in coastal sugar and cotton plantations. Terrible working conditions on these coastal estates drove many of them to flee and settle in Lima where they turned to small scale commerce and the building trades with good success. By World War II, at least 75 per cent of Peru's Japanese lived in the Lima metropolitan area where they proved vulnerable to government agents once the deportation process began. Brazil received the largest number of Japanese emigrants because it needed laborers for its huge coffee estates and because large tracts of land were available in its Southern states

¹ Taoko Endoh, *Exporting Japan: The Politics of Emigration in Latin America* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2009).

of Rio de Janeiro and Sao Paulo. Japan heavily subsidized the establishment of Japanese colonies in Brazil in the hope that it would become the principal haven for its overseas Japanese. This policy succeeded as Brazil today has more people of Japanese descent (1.2 million) than any nation outside of Japan.

Most Japanese who migrated to Latin America did so with a sojourner mentality. That is, they firmly intended to return to Japan after their hard earned savings allowed them to live comfortably “near the bones of their ancestors.” But this hope was rarely realized. Instead, the vast majority of the Japanese established tightly knit and comforting communities within the Latin American nations. Japanese culture flourished within these communities, Japanese schools taught the Japanese language and Japanese language newspapers kept the news of Japan and these communities available to their readers. The vitality of the Japanese communities cultural bonds was both a great strength, and a telling weakness. The insularity of the Japanese in Latin America caused them to be accused of being unwilling to assimilate. Of course, this same accusation could have been leveled against other ethnic groups, but it rarely was. In fact, Peru’s most prominent Japanese, Alberto Fujimori took pride in being more Peruvian than Japanese. He was educated in non Japanese Schools in Peru, France and Milwaukee and distanced himself from the Japanese community when he ran for president in 1990.

The 1930’s saw Latin America’s Japanese face increasing resentment brought on by their relative economic success in the midst of the Depression as well as Japan’s increasing militarism. Prior to World War II, for example, Japanese-Brazilian farmers

were eight times as productive as their Brazilian counterparts.² Still, the nations with the two largest Japanese populations, Brazil and Peru enacted legislation that effectively ended Japanese emigration to their countries. Brazil's president Getulio Vargas issued decrees that severely restricted the Japanese communities' activities. Most importantly, Japanese-Brazilian schools were closed and the use Japanese language was prohibited in public. In May 1940, the worst anti-Japanese riots to occur in the Western Hemisphere flared in the capital's Japanese neighborhoods and in the agricultural centers of Chancay and Huaral. Fueled by false rumors Japanese military activities, two days of nearly unrestrained destruction and looting of Japanese properties ruined the livelihoods of many Japanese-Peruvians. Nearly every Japanese-Peruvian business was either completely destroyed or badly damaged. In Lima police stood by while the rioters wrought their havoc. The capital's major newspapers choose not to report on the riots.³

Arrest, Deportation and Internment:

Washington had plans for the internment of Japanese-Latin Americas a few months before Pearl Harbor. These plans called for the round up of Panama small group of four hundred Japanese and relocate them on the isthmus. The protection of the Canal was indeed the primary reason given for the interment of Japanese Latin Americans on the west coast of South America. The other primary reason: the exchange of Japanese-Latin Americans for United States citizens caught behind Japanese military lines seems to have been suggested by the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, George Marshall and

² Daniel M. Masterson, with Sayaka Funada Classen, *The Japanese in Latin America* (Urbana, Illinois: 2003), 131

³ Ibid, 156-157.

Secretary of State Cordell Hull in late 1942. The U.S. citizens in question numbered 7,000 civilians captured in China, the Philippines, Guam and Wake Island.⁴ Hull advocated the deportation and internment of Japanese Latin Americans for the specific

Plans for Internment

purposes of exchange. The Secretary of State seemed indifferent to the fact that many of these potential deportees were second generation *Nisei* and had never seen Japan. Hull at one point advocated the removal of all Japanese from Latin America for security purposes, not seeming to be aware of the enormous logistical, diplomatic or legal implications of this policy. Relocating Brazil 200,000 Japanese was never even a remote policy, even if the that country's leadership had that intention. Since the Japanese were Brazil's most productive farmers, that hardly seemed possible. President Franklin Roosevelt even weighed in on the issue of internment. Commenting on the supposedly delightful climate of the Galapagos Island, F.D.R. suggested that the Japanese from the west coast of South America could be interned on one or more of the island off Ecuador.⁵

Not all Latin American nations allowed their Japanese residents to be deported to the United States for reasons of security or possible exchange. Mexico, seeking to maintain a nationalist and independent status relocated its Japanese from Baja California and its northern states to centers in the Federal District in central Mexico. Much of their property was lost as a result but most were able to rebuild their lives in Mexico City after

⁴ George Marshall to Commanding General Caribbean Defense Command, 11 December 1942, National Archives, College Park, Md. Records of World War II, Army file AG 014.311 as quoted in Thomas Connell, *America's Japanese Hostages: The World War II Plans for a Japanese Latin America* (Westport, CT. 2002), 152, and Connell, *Japanese Hostages*, 100-101.

⁵ Connell, *America's Japanese Hostages*, 5

the War. Brazil confined its Japanese to their remote agricultural cooperatives in the states of Sao Paulo and Rio de Janeiro during the war but did not technically intern them. Very importantly, families were allowed to remain intact and the property of the Japanese-Brazilians remained largely intact. After the War, the large Japanese-Brazilian community thrived.

The Internees and their Fate

More than 3 of 4 of the more than 2,000 deportees from Latin American from 1942 to 1945 were from Peru. The government of President Manuel Prado saw the expulsion of the Japanese from his nation as benefit to his political popularity. He pursued this process of deportation with vigor. Additionally, some in Peru wanted to take advantage of the dilemma of the Japanese-Peruvians for their own financial benefit. U.S. officials were fully aware of this. One U.S. intelligence official noted in late 1941 that “for every Japanese owner of a hardware or price goods store or barber shop, there are at least three (Peruvian) candidates (waiting) to take over their business.”⁶

How were these Japanese Latin America identified for deportation? In the case of most Latin American nations, F.B.I. agents assigned to intelligence work in Latin America worked with the U.S. Embassy and Latin American governments to create “Black Lists” of suspect Japanese for possible deportation. Since none of the F.B. I agents in Peru, for example, spoke or read Japanese, these blacklists were largely drawn from membership lists of prominent Japanese associations. Further, when many of these suspects went into hiding or bribed Peruvian officials, Prado’s police in exasperation arrested the majority of detainees haphazardly to fulfill arrest quotas.

⁶ Office of Strategic Services Memo, 12294, 20 December 1941, RG 226, U.S. National Archives.

These injustices were compounded when the deportees reached their debarkation location at New Orleans. Their passports were taken from them and never returned.. They were thus declared illegal enemy aliens and were subject to deportation when their confinement in the United States came to an end. Taken from their families, these early internees were without a family and without a country. A good number of these detainees were reunited with their families when their wives and children chose to join them in confinement. The vast majority of these nearly 2,000 Japanese-Peruvian never returned to Peru. The Peruvian government refused to readmit all but seventy-nine in a policy that remained firm through the 1950's. Peru has not issued a formal apology for its war time deportation, but in the mid 1960's the government of Fernando Belaúnde Terry donated a sector of land in central Lima for the construction of the Japanese Cultural Center. Of the 2,200 Latin American deportees only about 15 per cent were able to remain in the United States. The case of the "stateless" internees was taken up by the lawyer Wayne Collins who successfully argued for their continued residency in the U.S. The remainder of these unfortunate Japanese Latin Americans were deported to a Japan that lay in ruins. It was a country most had never seen and only existed in the images wrought by their parents or in their schoolbooks. The reality of the destruction and death they encountered was a great trauma. Nearly unbelievably, some of these Japanese Latin Americans were "relocated" to Hiroshima!

The narrative of these Japanese Latin American during World War II has been told in books, articles and movies by talented filmmakers. But it is narrative that is still not widely known. Almost every U.S. citizens knows the story of the internment of our own

120,000 Japanese American. Congress needs to encourage the discussion of U.S. policy toward the Latin American Japanese during World War II. U.S. archivists have diligently collected and declassified the documentation in thousands of pages in material in the Special War Problems Division files of the Department of State. Our full understanding of this injustice in the past, may help the prevention of this type of policy in the future.